

Telephone interview with Anna Corcoran, nurse aboard USS *Haven* during the evacuation of defeated French survivors of Dienbienphu from Saigon in September 1954. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 26 May 2004.

Aren't you from Massachusetts?

Yes. I grew up in Boston.

Where did you go to nursing school?

At the Carney Hospital School of Nursing, which at that time was in South Boston. I graduated in February of 1948.

When did you decide to join the Navy?

I wanted to join when I first got out, but at that time, being at the end of the war, they said you needed several years experience. Of course, Korea hadn't yet started.

As soon as we finished, a couple of us went to work in New York and then to New Orleans because we thought it would be fun. We ran into some other nurses who wanted to go to California so we went there. Korea started in June of '50 and I went to Los Angeles and applied to join. In those days, of course, we didn't have computers and they had to send all the material back to Boston to make sure I was who I said I was. So it took a few weeks, and I didn't go in until February of '51 and didn't go on active duty until May of '51.

Where did they send you for your first assignment?

San Diego.

I'll bet you enjoyed that.

I did. I had a great time. All my duty stations were great.

I know that for a nurse to be assigned to a hospital ship was the ultimate assignment at that time. Did you feel that way about it?

Well, I did. But you see, I went overseas to Guam and Japan. Then we were due to rotate home--Ruby [Brooks], myself, and two other nurses. There were about six of us. The chief nurse called us in and said, "You will be having your orders back to the States but would you like to be assigned to the hospital ship?" At that time they had reassigned a lot of their nurses either to Yokosuka or somewhere in the Pacific. So they were short of nurses and asked us if we'd go aboard to supplement their number.

So four of us said yes. When we got back to the States we would come into Long Beach and would then be given orders to our new assignments. We went aboard in Yokosuka in the first part of September '54.

What was your first impression of the ship when you went first went aboard?

I loved it. I had been in Yokosuka and had seen ships going in and out all the time. I was assigned to a three-bed room with Martha Bruce and a Medical Service Corps pharmacy officer--Kay Keating. Kay was the first woman non-nurse to be assigned to a ship.

When did you learn what the ship's mission was going to be?

They told us when they asked us if we wanted to go. They told us that we would be evacuating people who had just been released from prison and would be taking the Foreign

Legion back to Oran, Algeria, and the French soldiers into Marseille. So we knew that right away.

What do you remember about your arrival in Saigon?

Saigon was a beautiful city. It was so pretty and the buildings were so white. There were nice roads and streets. We didn't see a lot of destruction or anything like you'd see later. There was a cocktail party for us the first night after we arrived.

Had you and your other nurse colleagues been aware of what had been going on? Had you heard about Dienbienphu and all of that?

Yes, we did. One of our doctors at Yokosuka had been sent up to evacuate a lot of the Christians from the north down to the south part of Vietnam. His name was Dr. Tom Dooley. He was my ward medical officer. He loved life and he was great to the patients. He would push the piano up there and play on the wards in the afternoon. All the nurses were very fond of him, even though some of the doctors were a little envious. Consequently, the Medical Department has never spoken well of him. The CO and XO weren't crazy about him.

He had gone earlier up to Haiphong to help care for and evacuate the refugees. That was called "Operation Passage to Freedom."

That's right.

So you knew about what had happened to the French and that you were going on this mission of mercy to Saigon to pick them up. Did you have any idea before you saw them what condition they were in?

No. I only knew about the Foreign Legion from the movies.

What do you remember about the loading of the patients aboard the *Haven*?

We loaded them in the middle of the night. And there were two rumors as to why we were doing that. One was that they didn't want the Viet Minh to know how many we were taking, and the other was that it was cooler in the middle of the night. We loaded over 700 patients starting somewhere about 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. We had them all aboard by 10 o'clock.

Were you up close to this action or were you below decks?

We saw them being loaded. A lot of them walked aboard and some came aboard on stretchers or in wheelchairs.

What was your impression of their condition?

They were very thin and kind of grimy looking. They looked malnourished but they all gained weight on the ship before we got to Oran.

Before you cast off and headed back down the river, was there any kind of ceremony or fanfare or was it just a routine parting?

As I recall, it was quiet. I don't remember any band or anything to send us off.

Once you got underway, what was your role in caring for these patients?

I was assigned to the lowest deck where we had patients, the E deck, I think. There were two wards and there were 87 patients in each ward. We had triple-deck bunks. On that floor they all had to be able to walk up stairs to get their meals because there was no elevator that came all the way down and therefore no food carts could come down.

I will never forget sick call. Most of the patients down there were Foreign Legionnaires and many did not speak English or French but mostly Arabic. We had one man who was our interpreter. He had been a German SS trooper and had been a prisoner in Canada. He spoke perfect English, perfect French, perfect German, and a little Arabic. When we had sick call, the doctor would stand on the second bunk to examine the guy in the third bunk and the interpreter would squat on top of the third bedside table. Then the doctor would ask a question, the interpreter would ask the patient, and then the answer was relayed back to the doctor. It was certainly a very interesting and very different sick call than I'd ever done before or since.

Where did they get this interpreter from?

He was a Foreign Legionnaire. A lot of the Legionnaires were ex German soldiers.

Besides malnutrition, what kinds of problems or diseases did these patients have?

Almost all of them had worms. When I'd go down in the morning, they would bring their little boxes with stool samples to me to look at. We had to make sure the heads were on the worms. And after we had been underway for awhile, we found that almost all of them had body lice.

It must have been bad for all of you.

It was bad for one of my corpsmen. He had long hair on his arms and he got some. We all felt so bad. But then when everybody found out that we had them in both wards, I went up to the wardroom for the movie one night and all the fellas said to me, "You can't sit here! You can't sit here! We don't want your lice."

How did you get rid of the lice?

I hate to tell you because we'd be arrested today. We lined them up in the heads and sprayed them with DDT.

Well, that was very effective.

It was very effective but it wasn't good for them or us to inhale. But we did it. We didn't know any better.

What about the worms? How did you deal with that problem?

We gave them medicine for that and had to check their stools all the time. Most of them had Ascaris, a kind of worm that people got in those countries.

So these were the biggest problems then, the lice and the worms.

Yes. And then when we first got underway the patients enjoyed getting in the shower. We had to tie the showers off and only let them have a shower once or maybe twice a week because we were out of water. And the other thing they all did was eat bread. They ate so much bread that the bakery couldn't keep up with them. And a lot of our food, of course, was foreign to them.

I imagine that because most of the North Africans were Muslim, there were probably restrictions on their diet as far as pork and things like that.

Yes. The crew tried to accommodate them but at that point, most of them were so hungry that they didn't adhere to the restrictions. They just ate whatever they could.

I know they all spoke French and Arabic and you didn't speak those languages. Did you manage to communicate despite this restriction?

Yes. They would come up and try to tell you about themselves and their families. We managed to communicate with them because we were with them all day.

Did any of them talk about their experiences at Dienbienphu or any of that?

Very little. Most of them wanted to talk about their families.

On that voyage, the ship went up through the Suez Canal.

It did, and we had a problem in the Suez Canal. We had a wonderful skipper. His name was CAPT Clark. We got to the Canal and were to be there at a certain hour in the morning. He waited and waited and they didn't respond to his messages so he figured that he was supposed to go ahead. So he started in. Well, I'll tell you. That pilot came aboard buttoning his pants. He pulled us all the way over to the side because there were ships coming out. It happened so suddenly that we broke our anchor.

The ship probably pulled into the Great Bitter Lake at the south end of the Canal.

Yes. We went into the lake while they repaired the anchor. We were there for 2 days. Once the pilot got us into the lake, he left.

Did another pilot come aboard to take you through the Canal?

Yes. I remember that the Suez Canal was more interesting than the Panama Canal. It was very pretty.

Once you transited the Canal you went on to Oran to drop off the North African soldiers. Was there some kind of ceremony at Oran when that happened?

There was a band and they took the Foreign Legion patients off. Most of them, at this point, were ambulatory. Some of their wounds had healed and they were in much better shape than when they had come aboard. We had a couple of hours liberty in Oran.

When we left Oran later that afternoon and got underway, one of the soldiers jumped overboard. He had been drinking all afternoon in Oran. He wrapped his wallet in plastic and decided to go back.

So he hadn't had enough liberty?

That's right. They put the small boat in the water and the captain turned that ship around so quickly we almost crushed the sailor between the small boat and the ship.

The sailor must have been in some kind of trouble.

We had a court martial for him, which was the first court martial I had ever gone to.

Marseilles was the next stop. What do you recall about that?

The Catholic chaplain had arranged for anyone who wanted that could afford to, to go up to Rome to see the pope.

Did you go?

Yes. It was very, very exciting. We saw Pius XII. He had been ill so we couldn't have a private audience with him. But we went by train and got to Rome in the morning. The Catholic USO people there met us and took us where we could shower if we wanted. Then they took us out to Castle Gondolfo, where he was for the summer. He addressed the sailors from the *Haven*, who were on a mission of mercy. It was probably one of the most interesting things in my life to see him. He spoke perfect English and in seven other languages.

When you off-loaded the French soldiers in Marseilles, was there some kind of ceremony?

There was a ceremony. It was an emotional homecoming for them. In fact, one of them had died en route. His sister had come aboard. They off loaded the body in a casket with the French flag draped over it. That was very, very emotional to watch. Of course, at that time, we didn't know how many of our own would be going home that way from Vietnam.

Were there a lot of relatives waiting on the pier for their men?

There were a lot of people and we assumed that a lot of them were relatives because of the greeting they gave.

Where did the ship go after leaving Marseilles?

We picked up a few patients from the 6th Fleet. One was a patient in a cast and someone else who needed to go home. In those days, we weren't flying patients a lot. We went around Gibraltar and then crossed the Atlantic before going through the Panama Canal. We ended the trip at Long Beach having completed a round-the-world cruise.

It will be 50 years ago this year since you did all that. Do you ever think about it anymore?

Well, I remember a lot about my shipmates. They were a great bunch of people. In fact, I've been going to some of their reunions. Of course, the ship has been out of commission for so long and most of the people are getting pretty old.

Of course, you couldn't have imagined back in 1954 that 10 years later we would be involved in Vietnam just like the French were.

That's right. And we'd suffer the same defeat they did.

When did you retire from the Navy?

I retired as a commander in 1977 after being on active duty for 26 years.

What do you do with your time now?

I do some volunteer work and I wonder when I ever had time to work because I'm so busy.

You live part of the year in Marshfield and where do you live the rest of the year?
In Cocoa Beach, FL.

Near the Kennedy Space Center.

Yes. We sit on the porch and watch the Space Shuttles take off.

I've really enjoyed hearing your story about the *Haven*. Thank you for sharing it with me.

I'm glad to be able to help you.